

# Highlights from applicant surveys conducted in 2012

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Exploring what students tell us about their decision-making and requirements for careers education, information, advice and guidance

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# What did we find out?

UCAS is the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK and as such, hundreds of thousands of students access our website looking for information to guide their choices.

We also work closely with schools, academies, colleges and apprenticeship providers to provide information about education options at age 16.

In 2012, UCAS surveyed over

# 46,000

students to find out what they think about a range of issues that influence their education choices.

Students tell us that they need more good quality information to help them make informed decisions about their education and career choices.

Accessing the right information at the right time is critical and with hindsight many students would have liked to have more information earlier. There is also a strong demand for more personalised advice.

The main findings about information needs are:

- Students choosing their GCSEs and A levels or equivalents would have liked more information about the content of these courses and the way in which they are assessed.
- In particular, younger (aged 20 or under) students would like to have had more information about the A level or equivalent subjects and grades required to apply to particular university or college courses.
- Many UK sixth formers interested in applying to university or college said they wanted more information about student finance as well as bespoke careers advice.
- Many young pre-applicants would also have liked information about other post-18 options such as study abroad, gap years, and apprenticeships.
- Mature UK applicants said that they wanted additional information about loans, scholarships and bursaries, and more information about what university and college courses typically cover.

The report also looks at the factors influencing university and college application, application choices, and choices during Clearing. Irrespective of when students apply, the majority are looking to pursue a specific subject at a higher level to enhance their career prospects.

The survey findings presented are already helping UCAS to shape its information and advice resources to help fill some of the information gaps identified.

## Methodology

In this report we present selected findings from two surveys conducted by UCAS in July and October 2012. In total, there were 46,465 respondents to these surveys, including mature and international applicants, and UCAS Card holders (3,050 cardholders, who are mainly UK sixth formers intending to apply to higher education).

### Learner Research

UCAS' Learner Research survey was conducted online during July 2012 amongst 2012 cycle applicants plus a sample of UCAS Card holders. The profile of respondents was as follows.

| Learner Research survey                                     | Number of survey responses |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Younger UK applicants (age 20 or younger)                   | 10,210                     |
| Mature UK applicants (age 21 or older)                      | 8,513                      |
| International applicants (all ages)                         | 5,129                      |
| UCAS Card holders (UK pre-applicants, mainly sixth formers) | 3,050                      |
| <b>Total</b>                                                | <b>26,902</b>              |

### End of Cycle 2012 survey

UCAS' End of Cycle survey was conducted online during October 2012, amongst placed and unplaced 2012 cycle applicants. The profile of respondents was as follows.

| End of Cycle 2012 survey              | Number of survey responses |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Applicants placed in UCAS main scheme | 9,563                      |
| Applicants placed in Clearing         | 3,731                      |
| Unplaced applicants                   | 6,269                      |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>19,563</b>              |

UK applicants and international applicants of all ages completed this survey. When they responded to the survey, most of the placed applicants had recently enrolled at university or college.

Throughout the report, survey findings are presented alongside verbatim comments. These include not only free text responses entered as part of survey responses, but also quotations from qualitative research (focus groups, interviews and online bulletin boards) conducted or commissioned by UCAS in 2012.

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There is a wealth of information and advice available on the UCAS website

**ucas.com**

for students: [www.ucas.com/students](http://www.ucas.com/students)

for parents: [www.ucas.com/parents](http://www.ucas.com/parents)

## Introduction

UCAS has a small market intelligence unit which regularly conducts market research amongst its customers – our member institutions (universities and colleges) and applicants, as well as schools, colleges and parents. We listen carefully to our customers' views, which we gather via surveys and qualitative research. Customer research is essential for helping to inform and develop our products and services.

UCAS is uniquely placed to provide insight into how applicants are thinking and feeling. In this report we share some of what they told us in 2012. The survey results reported here give a rich snapshot of thinking that is not available from standard statistical data sets, including thoughts about career plans, educational choices and careers education.

In this report we describe exactly what our survey respondents told us; we have not adjusted the results, so our findings may not reflect the views of all applicants.

The surveys we report on here were commissioned for the first time in 2012 so we don't yet have a time series to see if applicant views have changed. As with all surveys, it is possible that there can be differences between what respondents think and other measures of behaviour. For example, in common with other surveys, a substantial proportion of our survey respondents indicated that the higher tuition fees in 2012 influenced their higher education choices – but statistical analysis of the choices made by all applicants, published in our analysis reports, shows clearly that overall, there was no material change in the type of courses applied to, or entered, by applicants in 2012.

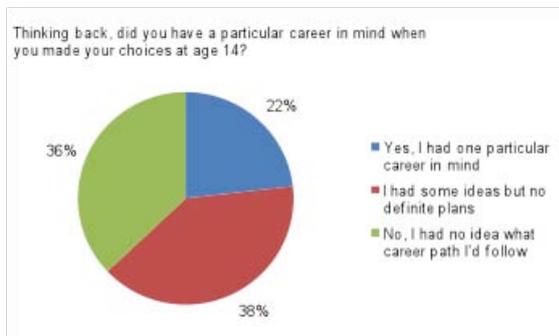
# Students choosing GCSE or equivalent subjects (age 14)

## Career plans

When choosing what to study for GCSE or equivalent options at age 14, few students are particularly career-focused.

Just over one fifth of the UK applicants we surveyed<sup>1</sup> who are aged 20 or younger said they had one particular career in mind when they chose their GCSE or equivalent subject options (22%). 38% had some ideas but no definite plans and over one third had no idea what career they would follow (36%). See Figure 1.

Figure 1



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,029)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)



I don't really have a clue what I want to do when I am older, but I don't really care at the moment."

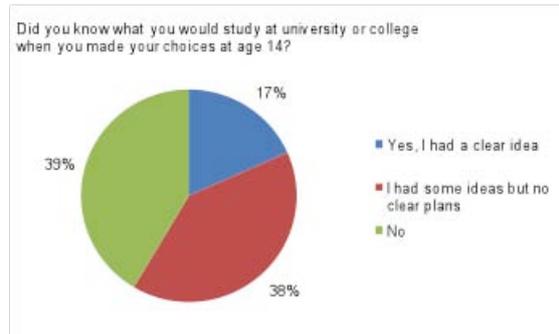
Year 9 boy, Learner Research, July 2012

## GCSE or equivalent subject and qualification choices

At this age, not many applicants were thinking about what they would study at university or college, and more than half said they would have liked more information and support to help them make their GCSE or equivalent choices.

Less than one fifth of respondents aged 20 or under said they had a clear idea what subject they would study at university or college when they made their GCSE or equivalent choices (17%). See Figure 2.

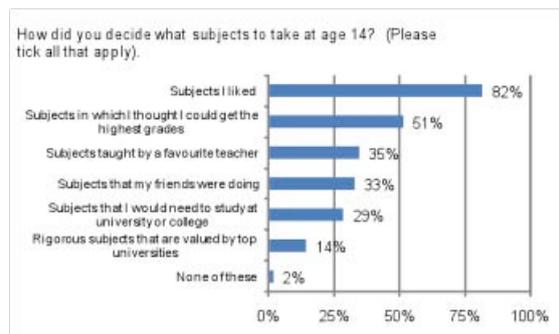
Figure 2



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,222)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

Less than one third of applicants aged 20 or younger who were surveyed said they chose their GCSE or equivalent subjects based on what they wanted to study at university or college (29%) and only 14% said they chose 'rigorous subjects that are valued by top universities'. See Figure 3.

Figure 3



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,218)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)



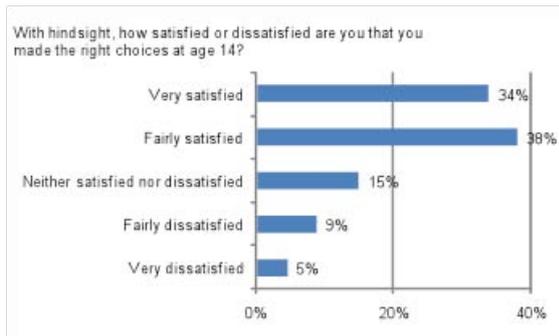
[When I chose my GCSE options] I was only thinking about getting into college rather than university. I think information [at that point] on the university/college courses would have allowed me to think more about all of my options (sic)."

UK sixth-form student, Learner Research, July 2012)

However, with hindsight, almost three quarters of respondents were very satisfied or fairly satisfied that they chose the right subjects at GCSE or equivalent (72%). 14% were fairly dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. See Figure 4.

<sup>1</sup>Learner Research survey conducted in July 2012

Figure 4



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,066)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

More than half of respondents (56%) said they would have liked more information and support to help them make their GCSE or equivalent choices. See Figure 5.

The information most often felt to be lacking was information about the content of these courses (37%), information about the way courses would be assessed (26%) and tailored careers advice (23%).

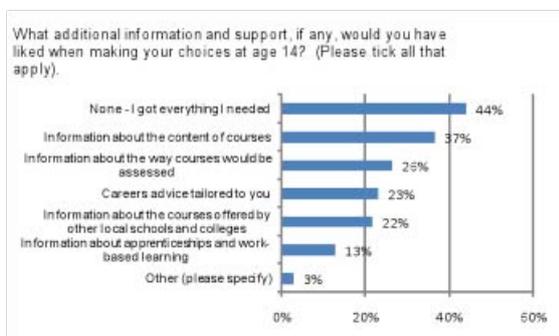


I would [have wanted a careers adviser] to give me a realistic view of the different careers that might be suited to me. Also how to get to a particular career and what subjects you need to study and what are good universities to go to for that subject.”

UK sixth form student, Learner Research, July 2012

More than one fifth of respondents would have liked information about GCSE or equivalent courses offered by other local schools and colleges (22%).

Figure 5

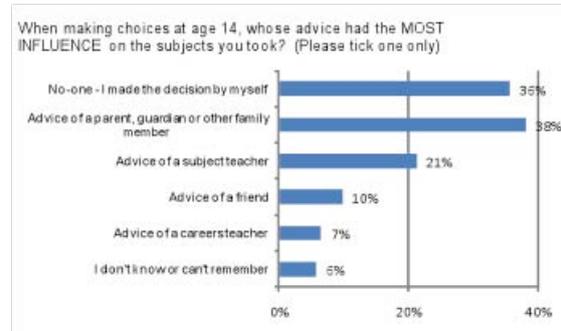


Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (8,669)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

**Parents had the greatest influence on respondents' GCSE or equivalent choices.**

38% of younger UK applicants said parents, guardians and other family members had the most influence on their choices, followed by subject teachers (21%), friends (10%) and careers teachers (7%). See Figure 6.

Figure 6



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,100)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

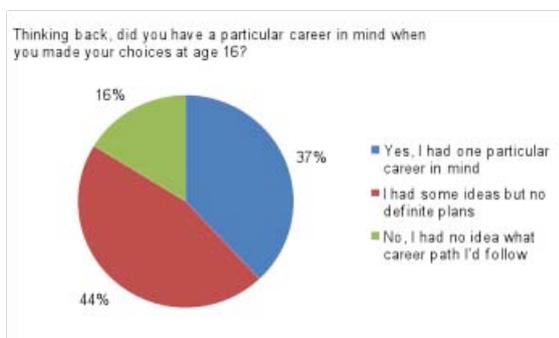
# Students choosing A level or equivalent courses (age 16)

## Career plans

By the time they are choosing what to study post-16, students are much more career-focused.

More than one third of UK applicants we surveyed who were aged 20 or younger said they had had one particular career in mind when they made their subject choices at A level or equivalent at age 16 (37%). 44% had some ideas but no definite plans and only 16% had no idea what career they would follow. See Figure 7.

Figure 7



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,029)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

However, we know from our qualitative research that many students have a wide range of different career aspirations and that their plans can change dramatically in the space of a few months or years.



On my GCSE selection I wanted to be a fashion designer. Then I wanted to be a translator. Then I decided I wanted to be an English teacher. Right now [age 19] I want to travel and see the world and write books about it. So I think it shows that what you want to do and be is very fluid – a dangerous thing with the restrictive aspects of qualifications.”

Applicant, age 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012

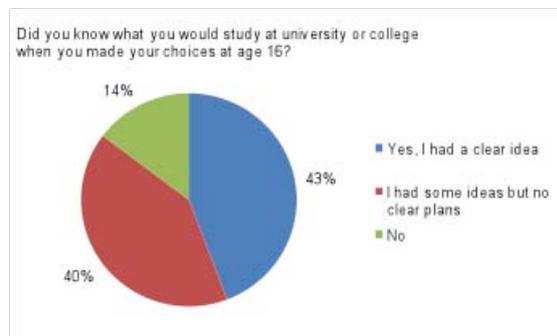
## A level or equivalent subject and qualification choices

Our research findings indicate that many students need more help choosing the post-16 qualifications and subjects which are most likely to take them to their preferred career.

43% of respondents said they had a clear idea what subject(s) they would study in higher education by the time they were choosing their A level or equivalent subjects. 40% had some ideas but no clear plans and only 14% said they did not know what they would study. See Figure 8.

Two years earlier, when choosing GCSE or equivalent options, only 17% had a clear idea what they would study in higher education.

Figure 8

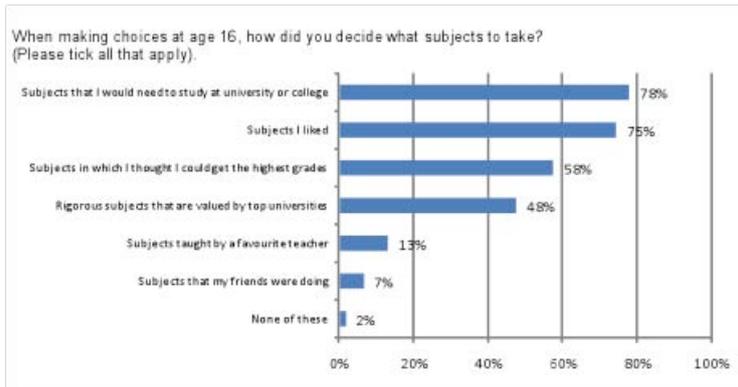


Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,222)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

**Unsurprisingly, subject choices at A level or equivalent are most likely to be based on what students think they will need to study at university or college.**

78% of the UK applicants we surveyed who were aged 20 or younger said they chose the A level or equivalent subjects they thought they would need to study at university or college. Other top factors included subjects they liked (75%), subjects in which they thought they could get the highest grades (58%) and 'rigorous subjects that are valued by top universities' (48%). See Figure 9.

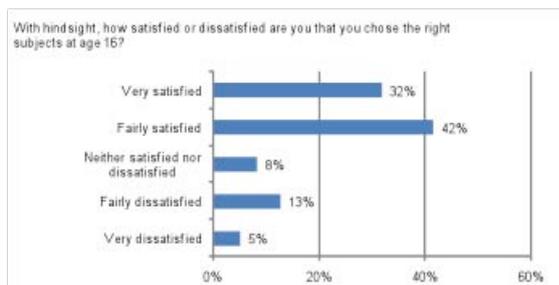
Figure 9



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,218)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

Whilst almost three quarters of respondents aged 20 or younger are very or fairly satisfied that they chose the right subjects at A level or equivalent (74%), almost one fifth said they are very or fairly dissatisfied with their choice (18%). See Figure 10.

Figure 10



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,117)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

Those who were dissatisfied with their subject choice expressed a range of regrets, including:

- they wish they had chosen easier or more rigorous subjects
- they experienced too much pressure (from school or parents) to choose subjects valued by top universities, rather than subjects they enjoyed
- they did not realise the content of the courses.



I chose harder, more respected subjects as I thought it would improve my chances of gaining a place [at university]. However in hindsight I should've just done easier subjects and got A/A\*s."

Applicant aged 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012



I regret taking AS Music Technology because in hindsight I don't think it is a very serious subject, or one that universities consider seriously."

Applicant, aged 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012

A large majority of respondents, four fifths, said they would have liked more information or support to help them make their A level or equivalent choices (80%). See Figure 11.

62% said they would have liked more information about the subjects and grades required to study particular university courses. Students also would have liked information about the content of A level or equivalent courses (44%) and the way in which they would be assessed (33%).

One fifth of respondents would have liked information about A level or equivalent courses offered by other local schools and colleges (20%).



[When choosing GCSE and A level subjects] I think we should have one-to-one sessions with advisers who can help us think about what we will need later on in our career and not just for the first steps."

Applicant, age 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012

Parents have also told us they feel students and their parents should be given information about higher education earlier than they currently do.



The schools need to tell the kids when they've got their GCSEs, 'Start looking at universities [now]."

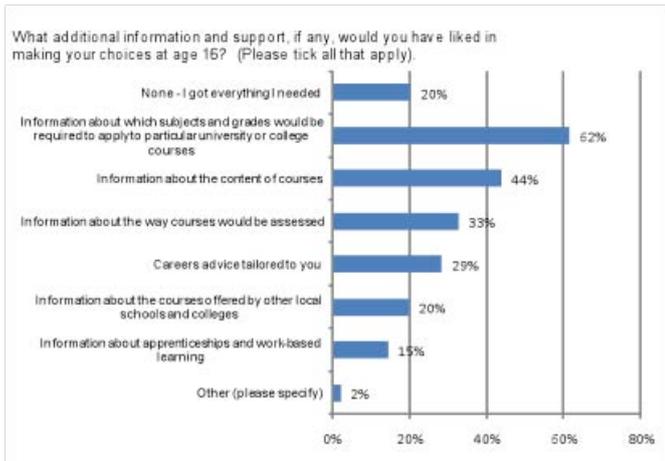
Parent of applicant, Parents and Advisers Research, May 2012



You can't do physics [at university] now without doing maths, I found that out really late, you need to know that sort of thing."

Parent of applicant, Parents and Advisers Research, May 2012

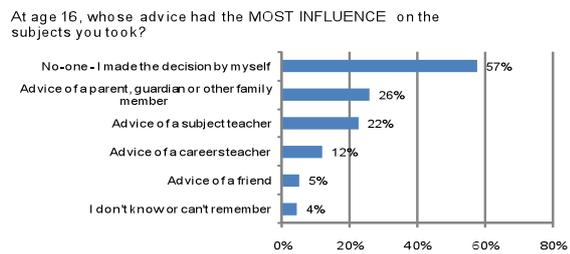
Figure 11



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,013)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

When making choices at A level or equivalent (as at GCSE or equivalent) parents, guardians and other family members had the greatest influence on respondents' choices (26%), followed by subject teachers (22%) and careers teachers (12%). See Figure 12.

Figure 12



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,100)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

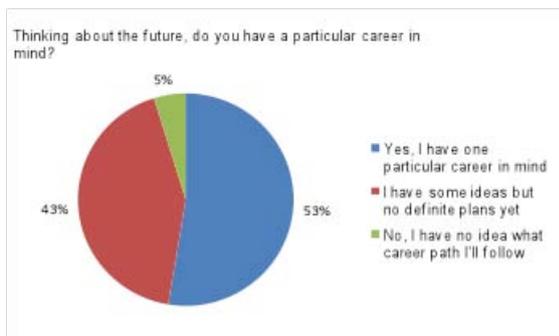
# Students considering university and college

## Career plans

Most of the UCAS Card holders<sup>2</sup> surveyed have at least some idea what career they will follow.

Only 5% of respondents said they had no idea what career path they would follow. 53% had one particular career in mind and 43% had some career ideas but no definite plans. See Figure 13.

Figure 13

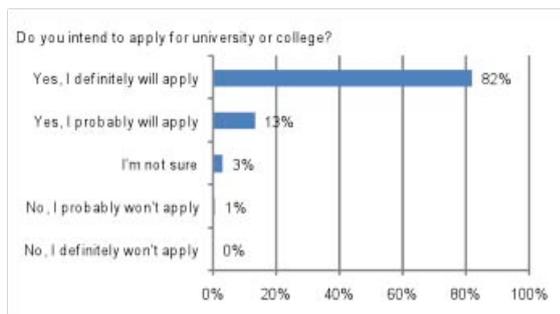


Respondent base: Pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders) (3,007) (Learner Research, July 2012)

## Influence of tuition fees

95% of the UCAS Card holders surveyed did intend to apply for university or college. Four-fifths said they would definitely apply (82%). See Figure 14.

Figure 14



Respondent base: Pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders) (3,019) (Learner Research, July 2012)

Common reasons for not applying (or being unsure whether they will apply for higher education) included:

- higher education is too expensive
- higher education is not for them
- they have another career route in mind
- they have not yet decided what career they want.



I feel strongly that I do not want to go to university. It has never been my passion to go and I feel that I could save a lot of time and money to launch into my chosen career in a different approach.'

UK sixth-form student, Learner Research, July 2012

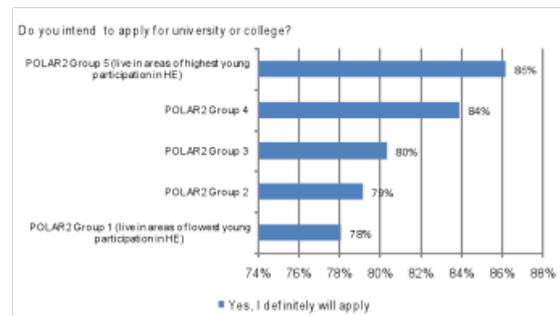


The fees are too high. I hope to be enrolled into an apprenticeship scheme.'

UK sixth-form student, Learner Research, July 2012

Amongst the UCAS Card holders surveyed, likelihood to apply for higher education is very high regardless of background measured by POLAR2 group<sup>3</sup>. Around 80% of those living in areas where there were low or average levels of young participation in higher education (POLAR2 Groups 1,2 and 3) said they would definitely apply for university or college. This was only a little less than the 84-86% of those living in areas where there was high young participation in higher education (POLAR Groups 4 and 5). See Figure 15.

Figure 15



Respondent base: Pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders): POLAR2 Group 1 (374), POLAR2 Group 2 (542), POLAR2 Group 3 (600), POLAR2 Group 4 (739), POLAR2 Group 5 (716) (Learner Research, July 2012)

<sup>2</sup>UCAS Card holders are mainly sixth form students who have registered to receive discounts and higher education information from UCAS. These students are therefore likely to apply for higher education.

<sup>3</sup>POLAR2 was developed by HEFCE and classifies small areas across the UK into five groups according to their level of young participation in higher education.

These findings highlight that UCAS Card survey respondents are a subset of the population that are very likely to say they will apply to higher education. In the population as a whole, UCAS' analysis work<sup>4</sup> shows around a third of 18 year olds apply to higher education and that this proportion is much higher (around 50 per cent) for young people from the most advantaged areas compared to young people from the least advantaged areas (around 20 per cent).

[www.ucas.com/documents/End\\_of\\_Cycle\\_Report\\_12\\_12\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ucas.com/documents/End_of_Cycle_Report_12_12_2012.pdf)

### Consideration of other post-18 options

Our research amongst UCAS Card holders and younger UK applicants indicates that there may be significant growing interest in undergraduate study abroad and apprenticeships, but not so much in flexible study. Respondents are keen to have more information about these options.

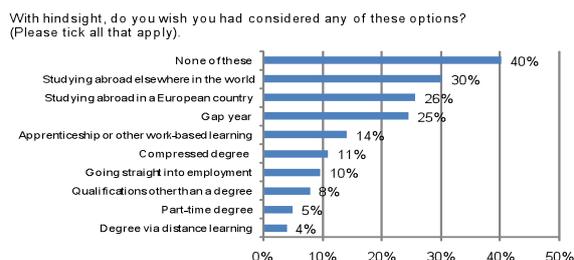
More than one third of the UK pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders) surveyed said they would like more information regarding studying abroad in a European country (36%) and elsewhere in the world (40%).

Only 2% of the UK applicants surveyed told us they had actually applied to study in another country. However, more than one quarter said, with hindsight, they wished they had considered studying abroad in a European country (26%). An even larger group (30%) said they wish they had considered studying abroad elsewhere in the world. See Figure 16.

14% said they wished they had considered an apprenticeship or other work-based learning. A compressed degree (11%), going straight into employment (10%) and taking qualifications other than a degree (8%) were all more popular than studying a part-time degree (5%) or distance learning (4%).

40% of the applicants aged 20 or younger who were surveyed were happy with their decision to apply for higher education in the UK; they said, with hindsight, they didn't wish they had considered any other option.

Figure 16



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,106)  
(Learner Research, July 2012)

Younger UK applicants studying the International Baccalaureate were most likely to have wished they had considered studying abroad in a non-European country. 41% of these students said they wished they had considered this option, compared with 31% of those studying AS and A level.

Applicants gave the following main reasons for not taking another route:

- they had not had enough information about these options
- the cost of studying and living abroad was too high
- UK full-time degrees were perceived to have much more prestige
- applicants wanted to experience 'real' student life.



I would have loved to have studied abroad but the information on how to apply and finances were poor.”

UK applicant, age 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012



Fees abroad for medicine were not much cheaper.”

UK applicant, age 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012



[Distance learning] didn't really provide the actual fun of being a student with loads of others similar around to meet. None [of the private universities] really had the academic prestige I was looking for.”

Mature UK applicant, Learner Research, July 2012

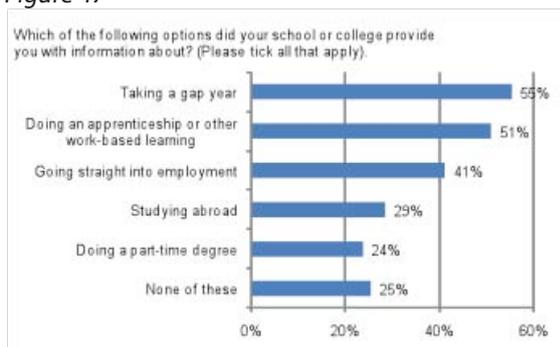
<sup>4</sup>How have applications for full-time undergraduate higher education in the UK changed in 2012', July 2012. [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)

**Schools and colleges are responding to learners' need for information about non-university routes such as studying abroad, apprenticeships and employment, but there are still considerable gaps.**

UK respondents aged 20 or younger who had applied for university or college were most likely to get information from their school or college about taking a gap year (55%) and doing an apprenticeship or other work-based learning (51%). Despite their apparent interest in studying abroad, only 29% of respondents had received information about this. Information about doing a part-time degree was provided to only around one quarter (24%) of UK respondents who had applied for university or college. See Figure 17.

One quarter of the UK applicants we surveyed who are aged 20 or younger said they were not provided with information about any other option (25%). Slightly fewer of the UK pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders) questioned said they had not had any kind of information about other options (19%).

Figure 17



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,360) (Learner Research, July 2012)

**The type of information about other post-18 options given to younger UK applicants varies by school or college type.**

50% of respondents attending independent schools received information about studying abroad, compared with 23% of those at comprehensive schools.

55% of respondents attending comprehensive schools said they received information about apprenticeships or work-based learning compared with 26% of those at independent schools.

Sixth form colleges (46%) and comprehensive schools (40%) were most likely to provide information about going straight into employment. Independent schools were least likely to do so (19%).

Further education colleges (29%) and sixth form colleges (26%) were most likely to provide information about studying for a part-time degree. Again, independent schools were least likely to provide this information (10%).



“My school was very pushy on sending us to university and didn't really give us any other options besides university.”

UK applicant, age 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012

**UK applicants surveyed who were attending independent schools were more likely than those attending comprehensive schools to say their school is 'very supportive' during the process of applying for higher education. See Table 1.**

The biggest differences were in terms of 'providing personalised careers advice' (41% vs 23%), 'helping you choose the right courses and universities' (50% vs 34%) and in 'providing information to parents to help them understand the UCAS process' (34% vs 21%).

Table 1

| How supportive was your school or college in terms of...                          | % of younger UK applicants attending a comprehensive school who rate their school as very supportive | % of younger UK applicants attending an independent school who rate their school as very supportive |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Encouraging you to apply to university or college                                 | 78%                                                                                                  | 83%                                                                                                 |
| Providing help to complete the UCAS application                                   | 63%                                                                                                  | 72%                                                                                                 |
| Encouraging you to go to as many university or college open days as you wanted to | 42%                                                                                                  | 36%                                                                                                 |
| Helping you choose the right courses and universities                             | 34%                                                                                                  | 50%                                                                                                 |
| Providing personalised careers advice                                             | 23%                                                                                                  | 41%                                                                                                 |
| Providing information to parents to help them understand the UCAS process         | 21%                                                                                                  | 34%                                                                                                 |

Respondent base: Younger UK applicants: attend comprehensive school (2,351), attend independent school (565) (Learner Research, July 2012)

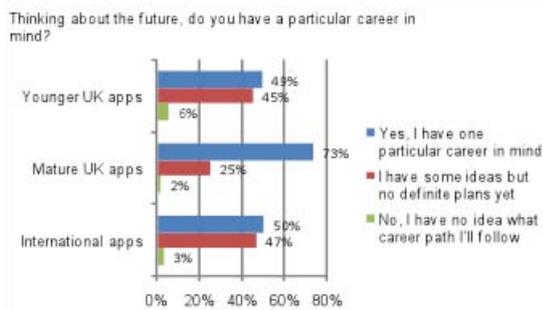
# Students making higher education choices

## Career plans

When surveyed in July 2012, shortly before most of them would start their first term at university or college, the majority of applicants consulted said they have at least some idea what career they will follow after graduation. Mature UK applicants (aged 21 or over) tend to be particularly career-focused.

Only 6% of UK applicants we surveyed who were aged 20 or younger said they had no idea what career they would follow. 2% of the mature applicants and 3% of the international applicants surveyed had no idea what career they would follow. Mature UK applicants were most likely to have one particular career in mind (73%). See Figure 18.

Figure 18



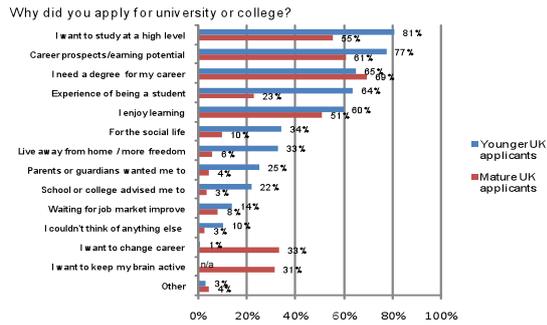
Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (10,145), mature UK applicants (4,438), international applicants (4,832) (Learner Research, July 2012)

Amongst the UK applicants aged 20 or younger who were surveyed, those studying at a further education college were more likely to have one particular career in mind (56%) than those studying at a comprehensive school (48%). Independent school students were more likely to keep their options open – only 37% said they had one particular career in mind.

When asked why they applied for university or college, 69% of the mature UK applicants surveyed said they needed a degree for their career and one third (33%) said they wanted to change career. 61% applied to improve their career prospects and earning potential. See Figure 19.

Younger UK applicants were most likely to be motivated by wanting to study at a high level (81%) and to improve their career prospects and earning potential (77%). 10% of younger UK applicants and 3% of mature applicants surveyed said they applied for higher education because they couldn't think of anything else they wanted to do.

Figure 19



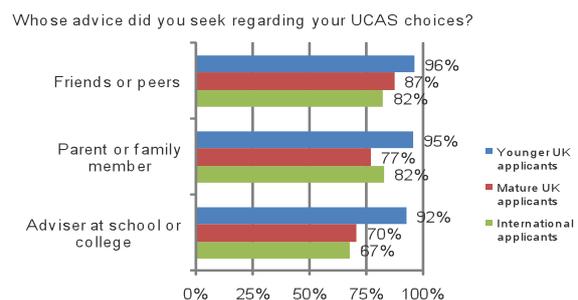
Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,745), mature UK applicants (8,108) (Learner Research, July 2012)

Amongst the international applicants surveyed, the top reason for wanting to study in the UK was the 'quality of UK education' (86%), followed by 'my job prospects will improve with a UK degree' (57%). Other popular reasons included wanting 'to learn about and enjoy UK culture and history' (46%), 'to improve my English' (37%) and 'so that I could live away from home or have more freedom' (30%).

## Higher education choices

Unsurprisingly, younger UK applicants were those most likely to seek advice from others when choosing which higher education courses and institutions to apply to. 96% of UK respondents aged 20 or younger said they sought the advice of friends or peers, 95% from a parent or family member and 92% from an adviser at school or college. See Figure 20.

Figure 20

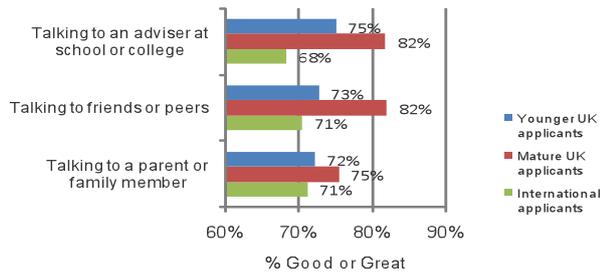


Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (c9,500, mature UK applicants (c7,000), international applicants (c4,700) (Learner Research, July 2012)

When making their higher education choices, mature UK students were those most likely to rate the advice they received as 'good' or 'great'. International students were least likely to do so. See Figure 21.

Figure 21

How would you rate the advice from these people in terms of helping you to make your UCAS choices? (Of those who used each one)



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (c9,500), mature UK applicants (c7,900), international applicants (c4,700) (Learner Research, July 2012)

International applicants were the group most likely to feel they had insufficient information to help them make the right higher education choices for them. Free text survey responses reveal that the information which would have been particularly useful was:

- comparison of courses and institutions
- information about completing the application
- fees and scholarships information
- information about accommodation, residential areas and the cost of living.



For me, [making my UCAS choices] was like closing my eyes and jumping into any one of a number of pits hoping to get a soft landing.”

International applicant, Learner Research, July 2012

Some international applicants would also like UCAS to provide more information about the benefits of studying in the UK. Similarly, some of the mature UK applicants consulted felt that UCAS could do more to encourage would-be mature students to return to education.



For international students, more guidance is needed in terms of ‘Why is the UK your best option?’

International applicant, Learner Research, July 2012



[UCAS should publicise] the benefits of HE study and some of the help available to prospective mature students.”

Mature pre-applicant, Learner Research, July 2012

### Influence of tuition fees

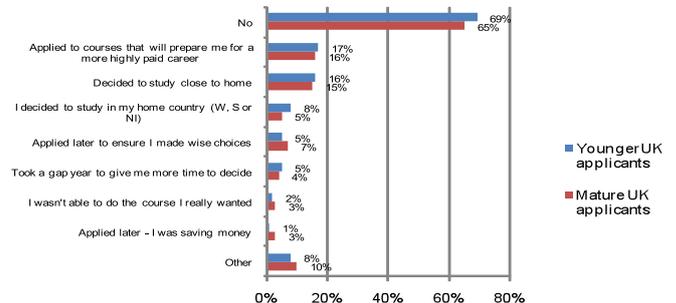
More than two thirds of UK applicants (67%) surveyed said the rise in tuition fees in some parts of the UK in 2012 had not influenced their UCAS choices. See Figure 22.

However, 17% of respondents aged 20 or younger said the effect of the increased fees was that they chose higher education courses ‘that will prepare me for a more highly paid career’. 16% said that they ‘decided to study close to home’.

Mature UK applicants indicated that they were influenced to a similar extent. 16% said they applied for courses ‘that will prepare me for a more highly paid career’ and 15% say they ‘decided to study close to home’.

Figure 22

Has the increase in tuition fees influenced your choices about which courses or universities and colleges to apply to? (Please tick all that apply)



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,743), mature UK applicants (8,092) (Learner Research, July 2012)

UCAS' analysis<sup>5</sup> of the choices of all applicants does not indicate that the higher and more variable tuition fees in England altered course choice materially. The average 2012 tuition fee and expected graduate earnings of courses applied to and entered in the 2012 cycle was very similar to previous cycles when the higher fee arrangements were not in place. Similar patterns were seen across different backgrounds and age groups although there was a small move to higher fee courses for 18 year old applicants.

The proportion of young applicants applying to courses where they indicated they would live at home was similar to previous cycles for most of the UK apart from Wales, where a lower proportion of applicants said they were intending to live at home.

In the 2011 and 2012 cycles an increasing proportion of applicants declined an offer as a result of the employment prospects associated with the course.

[www.ucas.com/documents/End\\_of\\_Cycle\\_Report\\_12\\_12\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ucas.com/documents/End_of_Cycle_Report_12_12_2012.pdf)

Few UK respondents who said their UCAS choices were not influenced by the higher tuition fees felt that the fees represent good value for money.

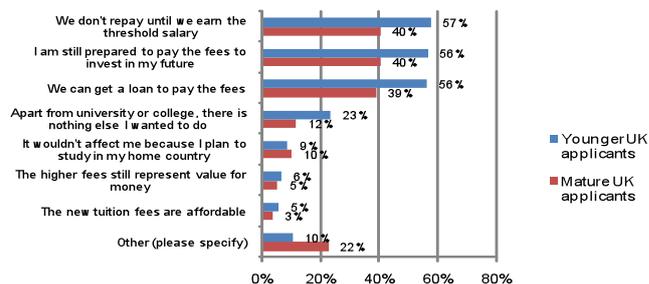
Many (especially younger students), perceived the cost of UK higher education as a necessary or worthwhile investment in their future.

Of those who said the rise in tuition fees did not influence their UCAS choices, only 6% of younger respondents and 5% of mature UK respondents said 'the higher fees still represent value for money'.

When asked why the rise in tuition fees did not influence their choices, 57% of younger respondents and 40% of mature respondents said this was 'because we don't have to pay back the loan until we earn the threshold salary'. 56% of younger UK applicants and 40% of mature UK applicants said 'I am still prepared to pay the fees to invest in my future'. See Figure 23.

Figure 23

Why did you say that the increase in tuition fees did not influence your choices about which courses and universities and colleges to apply to? (Please tick all that apply)



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (6,616), mature UK applicants (5,187) (Learner Research, July 2012)



To think that I will forever be in debt till I pretty much become old and retire is a bit daunting but nevertheless - this has not changed the fact that I want to get a degree and possibly have a better future.”

UK applicant, aged 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012



I try not to think about the future financial concerns. I know [student loans] are either paid off by [age] 50 or deducted monthly at a reasonable rate, but it's still a hell of a lot of money.”

UK applicant, aged 20 or younger, Learner Research, July 2012

<sup>5</sup>End of cycle report 2012, December 2012, www.ucas.com

## Student finance

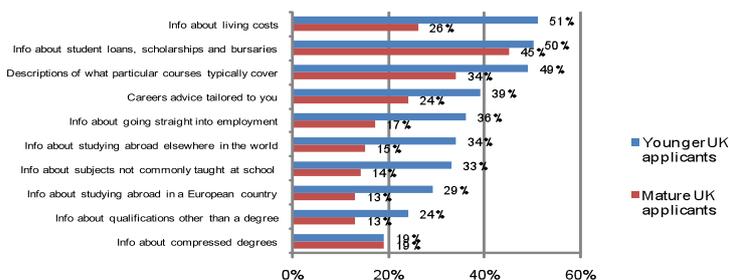
When deciding whether or not to apply for higher education, the additional information UK applicants are most likely to have wanted, is information about student finance.

Applicants aged 20 or younger were most likely to have wanted 'information about living costs' (51%) and 'information about student loans, scholarships and bursaries' (50%). They also wanted 'descriptions of what particular university and college courses typically cover' (49%).

UK mature students (aged 21 or over) were most likely to want 'information about student loans, scholarships and bursaries' (45%), but also 'descriptions of what particular university and college courses typically cover' (34%) and 'information about living costs' (26%). See Figure 24.

Figure 24

What additional information or support, if any, would you have liked? (Please tick all that apply) (Top 10 only)



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,216), mature UK applicants (7,626) (Learner Research, July 2012)

Younger applicants were most likely to want to receive this kind of additional information from teachers at school or college (92%), whilst mature applicants were most likely to want to get the information from the UCAS website (68%).

We know from qualitative research we have conducted with parents of sixth formers that many consider information about student finance most difficult to find.



I went on [the UCAS website] hoping to get a simple summary of how the [student] finances work and it directs you to Directgov! Which I'd already been on! I was hoping for an overview that said, 'If you earn this much you're not going to get anything'. And to find out how much my daughter needed to live was very difficult."

Parent of applicant, Parents and Advisers Research, May 2012



I don't know how I'm going to finance it [university, for my son]. If I could work out how I could afford it... I'd go back to being very encouraging and I'd probably make him go."

Parent of sixth-form student, Parents and Advisers Research, May 2012

## Information requirements

Qualitative research results indicate that applicants like to see comprehensive information and advice about higher education all in one place.

Respondents told us they would rather see all the information they needed on the UCAS website, rather than have to search it out on a number of different websites. Many would like UCAS to provide more student finance information, including signposting them to specific scholarships and bursaries they may be eligible for.



The [ucas.com](http://ucas.com) website could provide more information on each university instead of searching through [the] university's own website."

Younger UK applicant, Learner Research, July 2012



The thing I have struggled with is the lack of a single stop for mature students. I have struggled to find information about funding, council tax and bursaries."

Mature UK applicant, Learner Research, July 2012



I was not very satisfied with the information about tuition fees in Scotland. It would have been much better to find all the relevant information (ie including SAAS funding) on the UCAS website."

International applicant, Learner Research, July 2012

Respondents also said they would like UCAS to provide more information to help them choose the course most suited to them, particularly university league tables and information about job prospects.



**In an ideal world we'd have rankings of the unis for each subject [on the UCAS website]."**  
Mature UK applicant, Learner Research, July 2012

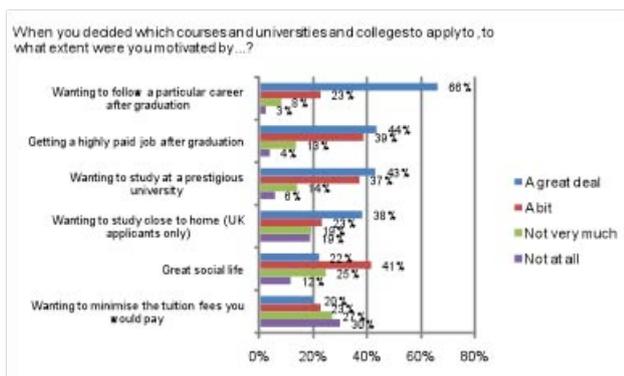
They wanted more detail about the content of university and college courses and to be able to compare them more easily. Many applicants would also like the student finance application to be more joined up with their UCAS application.

## Students entering higher education

### Higher education choices

Amongst respondents who were accepted for a place at university or college in the 2012 cycle<sup>6</sup>, wanting to 'follow a particular career after graduation' was a key motivation when choosing which subject and which institutions to apply to. 66% said this motivated their choices 'a great deal'. 44% said their choices were motivated 'a great deal' by 'getting a highly paid job after graduation'. See Figure 25.

Figure 25



Respondent base: Applicants placed in UCAS main scheme (9,397) (End of Cycle research, October 2012)

**International applicants are more likely than UK applicants to say their UCAS choices were motivated by wanting to study at a prestigious university.**

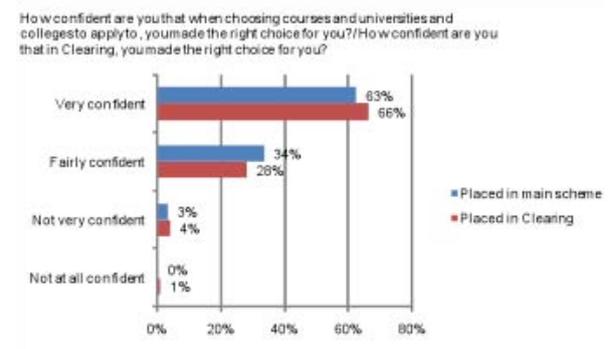
70% of international applicants surveyed said their choices were motivated 'a great deal' by wanting to study at a prestigious university. This compares with just 40% of UK respondents.

International respondents were also more likely than UK respondents to base their UCAS choices 'a great deal' on a desire to have a 'great social life' (31% international, 27% EU and 21% UK).

**Respondents' satisfaction with having made a wise choice of higher education course and institution is very high.**

Almost all of the students surveyed who had secured a place at university or college for entry in 2012 felt they had made the right choice. 97% of those placed in the main scheme<sup>7</sup> and 94% of those placed in Clearing were very confident or fairly confident that they made the right choice. See Figure 26.

Figure 26



Respondent base: Placed in main scheme (9,283), placed in Clearing (3,548) (End of Cycle research, October 2012)

**Respondents placed in the main scheme who feel 'very confident' that they made the right choice are more likely to have come from areas where there are high levels of participation in higher education.**

Of those who are 'very confident' they made a wise choice, almost one quarter (24%) were from POLAR2 Group 5 (those living in areas where there is the highest young participation in higher education). 14% were from POLAR2 Group 1 (areas in which there is lowest young participation in higher education).

**Younger UK applicants are very likely to share information with their parents.**

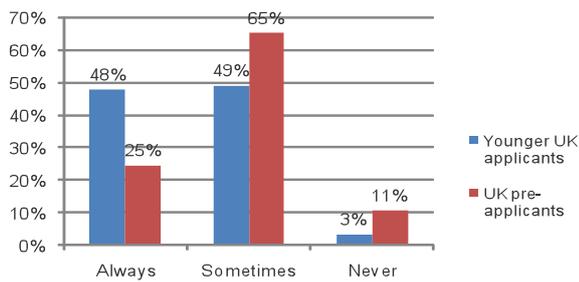
Respectively, 48% and 25% of younger UK applicants and UK pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders) said they 'always' shared information they received from UCAS with their parents. 49% of the younger UK applicants and 65% of pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders) consulted 'sometimes' shared information with parents. See Figure 27.

<sup>6</sup>The End of Cycle survey (October 2012) surveyed three types of applicants: those placed in the UCAS main scheme, those placed in Clearing and those who were unplaced.

<sup>7</sup>The main scheme refers to the main UCAS application scheme through which up to five institutions/courses can be applied to. This opens in September and closes to new applications at 30 June.

Figure 27

Do you ever share information that you have received from UCAS with your parents or guardians?



Respondent base: Younger UK applicants (9,669), Pre-applicants (UCAS Card holders) (2,637) (Learner Research, July 2012)

92% of those who had shared information with a parent had shared letters and 77% had shared emails.

### Influence of tuition fees

One fifth of respondents in the UCAS main scheme, and 10% of those placed in Clearing, said that minimising tuition fees influenced their choices 'a great deal'.

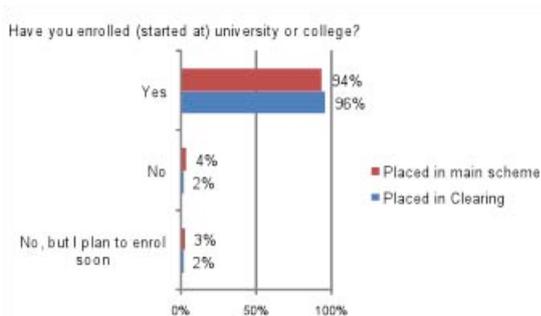
10% of unplaced<sup>8</sup> applicants who intended to reapply to higher education, said that with their next application they would choose universities or colleges where the tuition fees were lower.

When asked for their reasons for not enrolling, 10% of those placed in the main scheme but not enrolled and 14% of those placed in Clearing but not enrolled said they were put off by the tuition fees.

**Almost all respondents who were accepted have started in higher education or have deferred their entry to 2013.**

When surveyed in October 2012, 95% of placed respondents said they had enrolled (started their course) at university or college. See Figure 28.

Figure 28

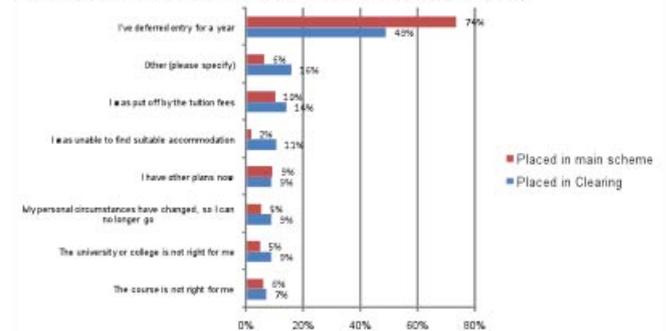


Respondent base: Placed in main scheme (9,464), placed in Clearing (3,687) (End of Cycle research, October 2012)

Most respondents who were placed but had not enrolled said they still intended to go to university or college, having deferred entry for a year. See Figure 29.

Figure 29

Why have you not enrolled on your course? (Please tick all that apply) (Top 8 answers)



Respondent base: Applicants who were placed but have not enrolled: placed in main scheme (377), placed in Clearing (57)\*

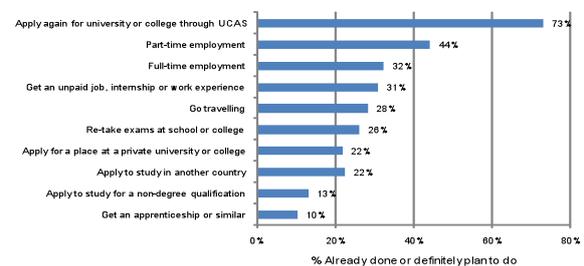
\*Note low base size (End of Cycle research, October 2012)

**Most respondents who were unplaced in the 2012 cycle are still keen on going to university or college.**

When asked about their next step, almost three quarters of unplaced respondents said they either planned to re-apply for higher education through UCAS in the 2013 cycle, or they had already done so (73%). See Figure 30.

Figure 30

Since results day, which of the following have you already done and which do you definitely plan to do in the next six months? (Please tick all that apply) (Aggregated results)



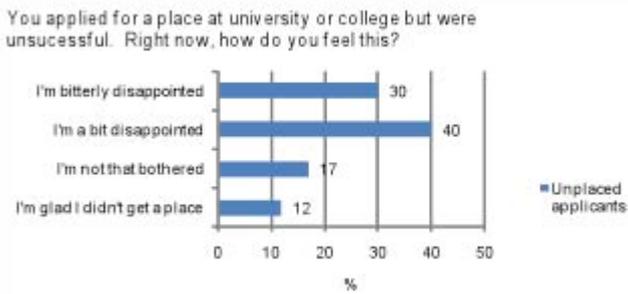
Respondent base: Unplaced (5,410) (End of Cycle research, October 2012)

Of those unplaced applicants who intended to apply again, 64% said they were more confident of being accepted because they already had their exam results. 50% said next time their choices would be more realistic.

<sup>8</sup>Unplaced applicants are those who were not accepted for any of their choices or had withdrawn from the system.

Less than one third of the unplaced applicants who were surveyed in October 2012 said they were ‘bitterly disappointed’ that they had not secured a place at university or college (30%). 40% said they were ‘a bit disappointed’. 17% said they were ‘not that bothered’ and 12% said they were ‘glad’ they did not get a place. See Figure 31. Free text responses reveal that most of those who were ‘not that bothered’ or ‘glad’ they didn’t get a place were at this point following a different path, such as studying another course, taking a gap year or re-taking exams.

Figure 31



Respondent base: Unplaced applicants (5,449)  
(End of Cycle research, October 2012)



Tuition fees only didn't influence my decision as all the universities I've heard of were charging upwards of 8500 so it didn't matter anyway."

(UK applicant, placed in Clearing, End of Cycle research, October 2012)

### Decision-making during Clearing

Around four fifths of respondents who used Clearing said they had looked for a particular subject or subjects in Clearing (81%). Searches for a particular university or college, for a local institution or for one located in a particular area of the UK were next most popular. See Figure 32.

Respondents who were successful in Clearing were more likely than unplaced users of Clearing to have looked for courses at a particular university or college (37% vs 27% respectively).

One in ten of the users of Clearing who were surveyed said they searched for ‘any course that might accept me’ (10%). Only 5% of those placed in Clearing and 6% of the unplaced users of Clearing said they searched in Clearing for an institution with relatively low fees.

Figure 32

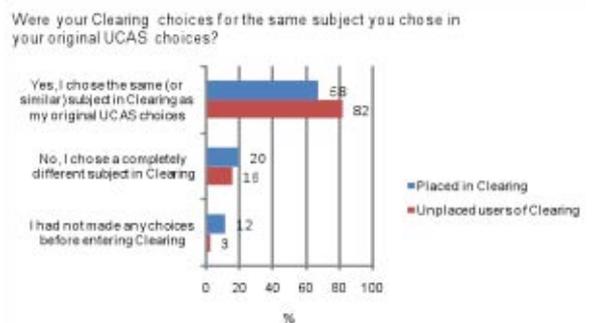


Respondent base: Placed in Clearing (3,433),  
Unplaced users of Clearing (1,355)  
(End of Cycle research, October 2012)

Most of the Clearing users surveyed said they were interested in the same or a similar subject as they had applied for in the main scheme. Respondents who were placed in Clearing were slightly more likely to choose a completely different subject in Clearing (20%) than unplaced users of Clearing (16%). See Figure 33.

Those placed in Clearing were also more likely than unplaced users of Clearing not to have made any choices in the UCAS main scheme before entering Clearing (12% vs 3% respectively).

Figure 33

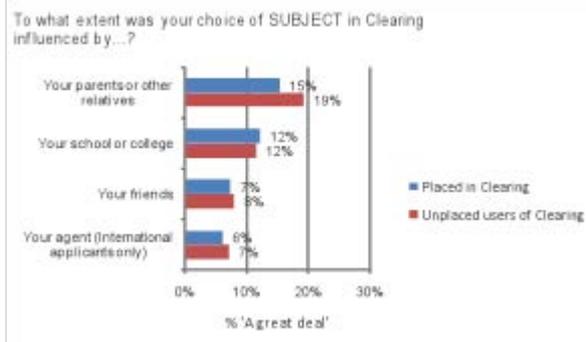


Respondent base: Placed in Clearing (3,419),  
Unplaced users of Clearing (1,337)  
(End of Cycle research, October 2012)

Respondents who used Clearing were most likely to say their subject choice and choice of university or college in Clearing was influenced strongly by parents or other relatives. 17% said their parents or other relatives influenced their choice of subject 'a great deal'; 22% said they influenced their choice of university or college 'a great deal'. See Figures 34 and 35.

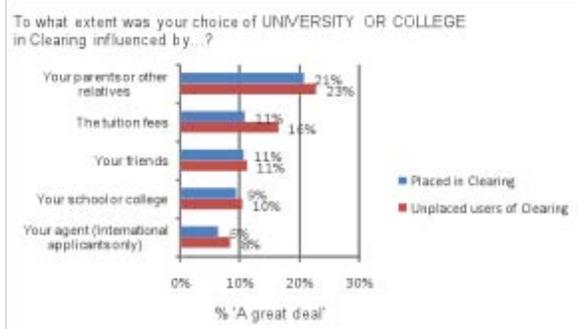
Compared with parental influence, the level of the tuition fees they would pay was much less of an influence on respondents' choice of university or college in Clearing. 14% of respondents who had used Clearing said the tuition fees influenced their choice of institution 'a great deal'.

Figure 34



Respondent base: Placed in Clearing (3,383),  
 Unplaced users of Clearing (1,304)  
 (End of Cycle research, October 2012)

Figure 35



Respondent base: Placed in Clearing (3,370),  
 Unplaced users of Clearing (1,297)  
 (End of Cycle research, October 2012)

# Conclusions

Our survey findings show that, from an early age, not all students were getting the careers education, information, advice and guidance they needed to help them make wise decisions about subsequent educational opportunities and possible career paths.

It appears that students at every stage, and from a variety of backgrounds, would benefit from more comprehensive careers education, information, advice and guidance from schools, colleges and other sources - including UCAS - to help them make more informed choices.

It's also important to note that students and their parents now expect comprehensive information about student finance to form an integral part of the information and advice they are given about higher education.

Some of our survey results are not substantiated by our statistical analysis. For instance, the statistical data from the 2012 cycle shows that there was no material change in the type of courses applied to, or entered by applicants in 2012. However, one third of our UK Learner Research survey respondents said their choices were influenced by higher tuition fees.

## Students choosing GCSE courses or equivalent and A level courses or equivalent would benefit from:

- information about the content of these courses and information about the way courses are assessed.
- tailored help to think through not just their post-16 choices, but to think about their post-18 options (including university and college) and future career options too, so that decisions made at this point do not prevent a change of direction at a later stage.
- more generic and specific information about the GCSE or equivalent and A level or equivalent qualifications, subjects and grades that universities and colleges require for entry to higher education courses.
- information about the GCSE or equivalent and A level or equivalent courses offered at other local schools and colleges, in case alternative provision would better suit their needs.

## Students considering university and college would benefit from:

- Information about student finance – including the loans and specific scholarships and bursaries available to them.
- Information about student loans, in particular:
  - o that tuition fees are not paid up-front; the student loan covers the full cost of tuition fees.
  - o that the loan is not repaid until they are earning the threshold salary.
- Information to help them choose higher education courses which are right for them, including:
  - o league tables and information to help them assess return-on-investment, such as job prospects.
  - o explanation of what particular higher education courses typically cover.
- information about typical living costs at university or college.
- more information about the full range of other options, including study abroad, gap years, apprenticeships, flexible study and non-degree qualifications.

## Students from less privileged backgrounds and mature students are likely to benefit from:

- information about the benefits of higher education and ways in which it is being made affordable for them.
- details of specific widening participation schemes that might be of benefit to them.
- encouragement to apply for higher education and help to make wise choices about the courses and institutions to which they apply.
- personalised careers advice.

## Parents, teachers and advisers

As parents, teachers and advisers are such an important influence on students' decision-making from GCSE or equivalent onwards, it is important that they are provided with all of this information too.

For further information please contact [communications@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:communications@ucas.ac.uk)

## Glossary

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Applicant               | A person who has made an application for higher education in the UCAS scheme.                                                                                                                                                              |
| Clearing                | An acceptance route available late in the application cycle.                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Compressed degree       | A degree in which the student studies the content of a three-year course over two years.                                                                                                                                                   |
| Defer (deferred)        | Most acceptances are into the academic year that starts immediately at the end of the cycle. Acceptances can also be deferred for entry into the following academic year. These are called deferred acceptances.                           |
| Flexible study          | Flexible study provides learners with choices about where, when, and how learning occurs. This may include part-time learning, distance learning and e-learning.                                                                           |
| International applicant | Non-UK-domiciled applicant.                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Main scheme             | The main UCAS application scheme through which up to five institutions/courses can be applied to. This opens in September and closes to new applications at 30 June.                                                                       |
| Mature applicant        | An applicant aged 21 or over.                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| POLAR2                  | Developed by HEFCE and classifies small areas across the UK into five groups according to their level of young participation in higher education.                                                                                          |
| Pre-applicant           | A person, particularly a sixth form student, who has not yet applied for higher education.                                                                                                                                                 |
| Respondent              | A participant in a research project, for example in a survey, focus group, or interview.                                                                                                                                                   |
| UCAS Card               | UCAS Card holders are mainly sixth form students who have registered to receive discounts and higher education information from UCAS. These students are therefore likely to apply for higher education.                                   |
| Unplaced applicant      | An applicant who was not accepted for any of their choices or has withdrawn from the application system.                                                                                                                                   |
| Widening participation  | Widening participation is about widening the social make-up of those participating in higher education and about narrowing the gap between participation rates of those from disadvantaged areas and those from the most advantaged areas. |